

Squatters is a dirty word as far as most home owners are concerned. But one city group has moved into the historic Davies Memorial Hall with an aim to make it a place for all of the community to enjoy.
BEN TUDOR
reports.



CENTRE FOR THE COMMUNITY: Squatters in the old school hall, beside the memorial hall, where they run an information centre.

We WANT to HELP

Squatters in the city are setting out to change their image by bringing help to the homeless and providing education, entertainment and a meeting place for residents of Canton and Riverside.

About 28 homeless people and students who have made the empty Davies Memorial Hall their base, have now come up with a plan to make it into a centre for all of the community.

The group has been received well by locals, who have turned up to have a look around and even donated bits and pieces.

"Somebody turned up on the doorstep one day and handed us a sink. He'd even taken the trouble to clean it up for us," said Pippa, an environmental studies student at Cardiff university.

"It's about participation. The local population will get out of the centre what they put in."

"We want to help and provide scope for enjoyment and education, but it's not going to work if people don't come along and join in."

They are already running an information centre - with details

on health and environment issues, crafts, yoga and dance - from the old school on the side of the memorial hall.

And their plans include a cafe, to be opened next month, and providing facilities for the homeless and low cost housing for the poor.

Activities planned include building a firing kiln for a pottery workshop, welding, painting, an occasional market, theatre and dance groups, gardening and a crafts centre.

The Davies Memorial Hall was built in 1894 specially to house Cardiff's homeless.

"We want to carry on in the same vein," said Oscar, a PhD student at Cardiff university, who is helping with the renovation of the buildings.

"Hopefully, people will agree with us that the project is a good idea. We want anybody and everybody to turn up, learn a skill or find out about something and enjoy themselves."

"We want to educate people as well. We've already got an

PICTURES BY ALAN GRIST AND SIMON CHAPMAN



WORK UNDER WAY: Student Pippa helps with the renovations.

information centre up and running, and we're hoping to set up a pottery workshop as well."

A compost making service is also planned, with donations of plant waste being recycled for local gardeners.

The group hopes to secure funding from the Welsh Office and other Government bodies to get the project up and running and renovate the buildings. But winning the cash depends on the owners - the Presbyterian Church of Wales - agreeing to let them use the buildings.

So far, the church has given the scheme its support.

"The ideas outlined by the group have a great deal to offer."

"As a church, we would like to be involved in any trust set up to help the group's aims and objectives," said church head Dafydd Owen.

"Negotiations are under way between the group, the church and the council."

Cardiff City Council Leader Sue Essex added: "The local councillors have decided that if we can

financially support a renovation of the building together with the owners and the squatters, that would be very helpful."

The squatters have made most of the buildings on the site safe, warm and dry. There is now electricity and running water, as well as a wood burning stove.

"We're not here to recruit people to some cause or other," said Pippa.

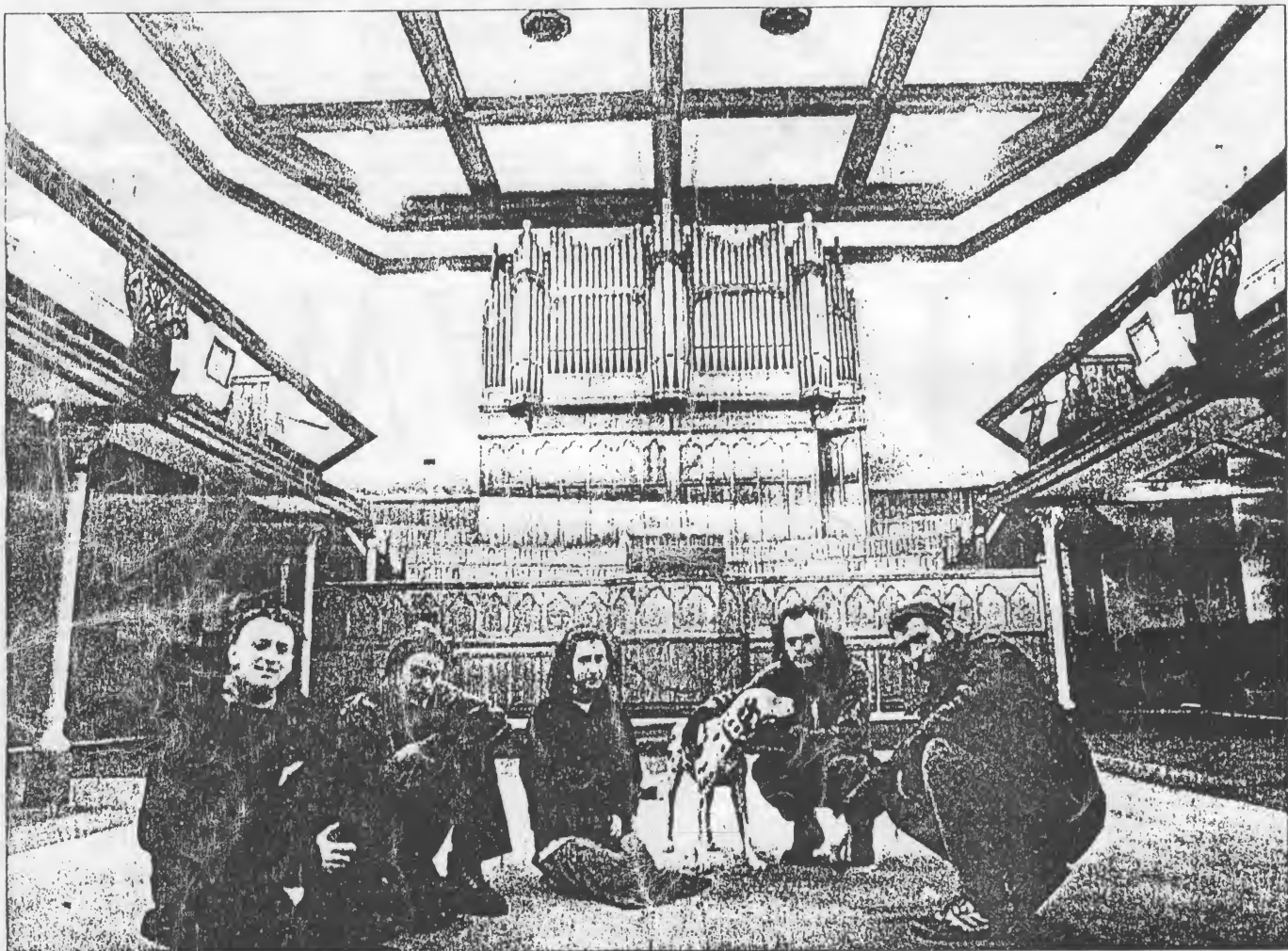
"We want people to come along and actually talk to each other and really enjoy themselves, instead of just staring at the telly each night."

Jim, another one of the helpers, said: "The actual plans for the centre may change a bit. They have certainly changed since we came here in October. But we want the basic ethos of the centre to remain. We want people to come and join in with the activities. The whole idea is that people enjoy themselves and learn at the same time."

Guided tours are, as yet, out of the question. "The buildings still look like a worksite. But people wishing to put in a bit of elbow grease are very welcome," he added.

CELEBRATIONS

A WEEKLY LOOK AT THE GOOD THINGS IN LOCAL LIFE



NEW USE: Squatters in the Davies Memorial Hall they want to turn into a community centre.

Picture: Alan Grist

Group with a mission

They were students, jobless graduates and homeless men and women with one thing in common – they needed a roof over their heads. So, three months ago, they moved into the empty Davies Memorial Hall, in Cowbridge Road, Cardiff. “They’re not squatters in the usual sense of the word,” said Dafydd Owen, head of the building’s owners – the Presbyterian Church of Wales. “They want to put something back into the local community.” The 28-strong group now living there, have set the building humming with activity and aim to give the people of Canton and Riverside a community centre with a difference. See page 8

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